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To cite this article: Neil Kenny (2026) A multilingual ladder?, The Language Learning Journal, 54:1, 128-141, DOI: [10.1080/09571736.2025.2557462](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2025.2557462)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2025.2557462>



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Published online: 22 Sep 2025.



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A multilingual ladder?*

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ABSTRACT

Following recent calls for alternative assessment routes, or for a stepped frame of accreditation for languages in England based on the Languages Ladder Assessment Scheme (LLAS), of which Asset Languages was the OCR version (2004–13), this paper outlines a feasible new framework which adopts features of LLAS while differing from it in key respects. The new framework would address some systemic challenges that are currently acting as barriers to the uptake and accreditation of language-learning. The proposal is for a Multilingual Ladder (MLL), consisting of three elements:

- i the MLL Framework: an over-arching, lifelong framework for learning and accreditation;
- ii MLL Assessments: i.e. some new qualifications, complementing but not replacing existing ones (GCSEs and A-levels); both MLL Assessments and GCSEs/A-levels would be encompassed by the MLL Framework;
- iii an MLL Profile for each learner.

The paper proposes how the MLL would relate not just to GCSEs and A-levels but also to a proposed new certificate in Applied Languages, and to existing qualification- and proficiency-frameworks.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2025

Accepted 1 September 2025


KEYWORDS

Alternative qualifications; multilingual ladder; Asset Languages; stepped qualifications

1. Introduction

Among the systemic and interconnected challenges in languages education in England that need to be addressed by any strategy for increasing uptake are:¹

- (a) barriers to language-learning opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged students;²
- (b) patchiness of curricular pathways across the stages of education;³
- (c) dissociation between learning of (i) English and of (ii) other languages;⁴
- (d) dissociation between (i) English and other language/s learned at a student's mainstream school and (ii) the language/s other than English that about 1 in 5 students (in state schools in England) speak or hear or learn at home or in a complementary school (Department for Education 2020);⁵
- (e) lack of accreditation available in most languages spoken or heard or learned at home or in complementary schools, beyond the relatively few languages available at GCSE;⁶

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*The following have kindly provided information, ideas, insights, and corrections (which does not necessarily betoken agreement with all the views expressed here): Jim Anderson, Karen Ashton, David Blow, Janice Carruthers, Ramona Gonczal, Vicky Gough, Bernadette Holmes, Barrie Hunt, René Koglbauer, Suzanne O'Farrell, Ben Rampton, Liz Threadgold, Hannah Walz, Li Wei, John Worne, and the journal's anonymous reader.

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- (f) assessment challenges posed by the co-existence within single cohorts of (i) learners who have no prior exposure to a language and (ii) learners who have had exposure to the language at home;⁷
- (g) varied support for languages by school leaders.

To be effective, any strategic response to these challenges needs to:

- (a) take a holistic, system-wide approach;
- (b) incentivise choices (made by learners and by schools);
- (c) be feasible at a time of fiscal squeeze, heavy teacher workload, and challenges to teacher recruitment and retention;
- (d) be clear to students, parents, teachers, and employers (injecting greater clarity into the qualifications landscape; avoiding proliferation of qualifications that might undermine the perceived value of new ones and confuse stakeholders);
- (e) learn lessons from past initiatives.

This paper proposes a Multilingual Ladder (MLL) as a transformative yet feasible solution. It also indicates how primary-school learning, GCSEs, A-levels, a proposed new Level 3 qualification, university degrees, and lifelong learning would all fit in with the MLL. The paper focuses on England, but since an MLL would be a flexible framework encompassing different qualifications, it could in principle be adapted to the different education systems of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

2. A multilingual ladder

In response to the systemic challenges sketched above and to the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR),⁸ calls have been mounting for alternative assessment routes or for an over-arching, criterion-referenced, stepped frame of accreditation for languages,⁹ informed by the experience of the Languages Ladder Assessment Scheme (LLAS) – of which Asset Languages was the OCR version (2004–13) – initiated by the National Languages Strategy of 2002–10.¹⁰

Inspired by those recent calls and by the LLAS, a possible framework is outlined below, including some detail for illustrative purposes, but leaving much detail to be determined. What is proposed addresses the current above-listed challenges while also respecting the above-listed constraints. It neither requires nor precludes any change to existing GCSE and A-level curricula. It adopts features of the previous LLAS and Asset Languages but differs from them in key respects.

This paper proposes a Multilingual Ladder (MLL), consisting of three elements:

- i the MLL Framework: an over-arching, lifelong framework for learning and accreditation;
- ii MLL Assessments:¹¹ i.e. some new qualifications, complementing but not replacing existing ones (GCSEs and A-levels); both MLL Assessments and GCSEs/A-levels would be encompassed by the MLL Framework;¹²
- iii an MLL Profile for each learner.

This would be a *Multilingual Ladder*. Grounded in the importance of learners acquiring literacy in English, the MLL would include English and many other living languages (including sign languages), plus ancient languages.¹³ Everyone would be on the Multilingual Ladder – from an early age into adulthood. A learner would step onto the ladder (before gaining any accreditation) from the point at which they begin to use or to learn other languages formally. For most learners, that would be at Key Stage 2 (KS2) in their mainstream school (where currently they typically learn some French, Spanish, or another language). But some learners would step onto the ladder at an earlier point, for example when they start learning English in the case of so-called EAL students (English as an Additional Language). It would be possible to progress to higher stages of the

ladder both within school-year groups and outside them. At the other end of the age spectrum, adults might progress to higher stages in a language *and/or* start a language from Breakthrough stage, whether at college, at university, as an ESOL learner (English for Speakers of Other Languages), through self-study, and so on.¹⁴

So for each learner ‘multilingual’ here simply means ‘more than just one language’; it does not necessarily mean ‘many languages’.

From an early age into adulthood, each learner would have a Multilingual Ladder (MLL) Profile. This profile would encompass both learning and accreditation. It would be a succinct, evolving statement of what language/s the student is learning and of any accreditations gained, e.g.

- L1 English
- L2 Spanish @KS2
- no MLL Assessments yet¹⁵

This MLL Profile would provide information, yet would also serve to give languages much needed visibility in the public mind; and it would acculturate learners into a sense that their different kinds of language-learning are interconnected, all part of the same over-arching discipline of languages. That sense would be reinforced by incorporating home language/s into the MLL Profile:

- L1 Arabic
- L2 English
- L3 Spanish @KS2
- no MLL Assessments yet

The MLL Profile would encourage learners to see subsequent additions as enrichments rather than discontinuities, to ‘recognise and value multilingualism and make connections between all of the languages in their repertoires’,¹⁶ for example at transition from primary to secondary school:

- L1 Arabic
- L2 English
- L3 Spanish @KS2
- L4 French @KS3
- no MLL Assessments yet

The Multilingual Ladder would be comprehensive in two respects, and pragmatically selective and targeted in a third respect:

- (a) as a *learning and accreditation framework* and as generating a *profile for every learner*, the MLL would be comprehensive: it could *in principle* encompass accreditations along the whole ladder of language-learning. Those accreditations would be of two kinds: (i) existing ones, such as GCSE and A-level; (ii) new ‘MLL Assessments’.
- (b) but on the other hand, those new MLL *Assessments* would *not* themselves be comprehensive. Rather, they would be pragmatically selective, targeted, and responsive to evolving priorities. The new MLL Assessments could be phased in sequentially, rather than introduced in a single wave. They could be targeted in the first instance at points within the languages education eco-system (e.g. end of KS2 and of KS3) where they are likely to be of most use in building coherent learning pathways and increasing uptake. New MLL Assessments would be built around current GCSE and A-level offerings, supporting them, complementing them, not reduplicating them. They would *not* add to the overall assessment burden (with which CAR is rightly preoccupied) but rather would provide an opportunity to gain accreditation for proficiency acquired in mainstream schools (e.g. for a language which is dropped) or in complementary ones.

The MLL Framework would have six stages:

- Breakthrough
- Preliminary
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Proficiency
- Mastery¹⁷

For a given language at a given stage, there could in principle be four new MLL Assessments available, one in each of the four skills – Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing – with the option of taking just one or two of them.¹⁸ (For ancient languages, assessments would be available in just one skill: reading.) The assessments would be proficiency-based.¹⁹ For example, an MLL Speaking award at Breakthrough stage would attest proficiencies including the ability to give basic information or to ask and answer simple questions, and at Mastery stage proficiencies (that one might expect of say a postgraduate student) including the ability to communicate confidently in most formal and informal situations.²⁰ A ‘reached/not yet reached’ model for each skill within a given stage (rather than each stage being subdivided into grades for a given skill) could be considered (in order to maximise clarity, simplicity, and possibly affordability).²¹ Assessment would be rigorous, but if the system was working smoothly then the great majority of takers would pass, since teachers would encourage learners only to take an assessment at a stage (within the ladder) and for a skill in which they had a good chance of passing. The qualifications would be voluntary.²²

Whether to take the MLL Assessments, and which ones to take when, would be at the discretion of schools, but some assessments (not necessarily in all four skills) might typically be taken at the end of KS2 or KS3 for most learners, or at any appropriate point in the case of heritage learners of a language. The assessments would be short, simple to administer (fitting within a timetabled lesson, takeable and re-takeable at say two different points in the year),²³ with different students in a class taking assessments at different stages or in different skills, and with external assessment via an awarding body, probably using digital technology, which would be likely to drive down costs, and could be introduced gradually, at specific MLL stages.²⁴ External assessment would have the advantage of reinforcing these qualification’s robustness and usability. There would be a necessary trade-off between those benefits and the pedagogical and practical ones that derive on the other hand from teacher-assessment and formative assessment. There might be a more limited role for teacher-assessment and formative assessment, perhaps especially at Breakthrough stage, as part of normal class-time activities, with some external moderation.²⁵

3. Relation of MLL to other languages qualifications (I): GCSEs and A-levels

It is to be hoped that the Government aspiration will continue to be for the great majority of students to take a languages GCSE at KS4 (and that the statutory requirement for virtually all to do so will be restored in the longer term once there is a large enough teacher workforce).²⁶ The MLL Framework would support uptake of languages GCSEs by instilling a greater sense of progression, a higher profile for languages among parents and school leaders as well as students, and greater confidence among students that their language-learning achievements will be recognisable – at a glance and in the round – by employers, colleges, and universities (through the MLL Profile).

On the other hand, those students (currently over half) who do not take a languages GCSE will be able to gain (MLL) accreditation at the end of KS3, which will certify what proficiencies they have acquired.²⁷ This will moreover provide them with a clear future pathway to the next step up the ladder should they want it at any point in their future.²⁸ As for the just under half of KS4 students who currently take a languages GCSE, they too could also gain MLL Assessment qualifications at the end of KS3 if wished, before then going on to the GCSE. Their languages GCSE would be

pegged to a stage on the MLL – perhaps pegged for example to MLL Preliminary stage for GCSE Foundation tier/lower grades or to MLL Intermediate stage for GCSE Higher tier/upper grades.

One purpose of this pegging would be to tell those holders of a GCSE in a given language who are not continuing the language to A-level – but who might want to continue it via further MLL or MLL-pegged awards – *at which MLL stage they are now operating*. Another purpose of the GCSE/MLL pegging would be to enable the creation of MLL Assessments *in languages not currently available as GCSEs* (such as Romanian) – assessments which attest levels of speaking, listening, reading, and/or writing broadly equivalent to those attested by GCSEs. This would address, in a feasibly low-cost way, an urgently felt current need for qualifications in those languages, though without precluding the eventual introduction of GCSEs in them. (Crucially, the introduction of MLL Assessments in languages not available as GCSEs would enable those new assessments to be accessible in principle not just to heritage learners but to L1-English learners of those languages too, as discussed below.²⁹)

Overall, the approximate pegging between GCSE and MLL assessments would have the following caveats:

- (a) the award of the GCSE would not entail any actual MLL accreditation (or vice-versa)
- (b) the GCSE and MLL awards would not be deemed equivalent in value or scope
- (c) actual MLL Preliminary or Intermediate award-holders would not be deemed to have learned exactly what GCSE award-holders had learned
- (d) the GCSE and MLL awards would not have the same pillars of progression: indeed, the pillars of the reformed GCSEs (in French, German, Spanish) are phonics, vocabulary, and grammar, whereas the pillars of the MLL are the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing).

But holders of the GCSE, which does test the four skills (if in an aggregated way), would be deemed to have broadly equivalent speaking/listening/reading/writing skills to those attested by Preliminary MLL (for lower GCSE grades) or Intermediate MLL (for higher GCSE grades). This indicating of equivalence would be *broad*, and so compatible with what might be the simple ‘reached/not yet reached’ nature of the MLL Assessments.

So if the illustrative student mentioned earlier, having succeeded at two MLL Assessments for their KS2 language, continued their KS3 language to GCSE, then by now their MLL Profile might look something like this:

- L1 Arabic (no accreditation)
- L2 English GCSE Grade 4
- L3 Spanish @KS2, MLL Breakthrough (Speaking + Listening)
- L4 French GCSE Grade 6 [\approx MLL Intermediate (4 skills)]

Moreover, if they had attended a Saturday school and, based on that learning, sat a couple of MLL Assessments in their mainstream school, then their MLL Profile might read instead something like this:

- L1 Arabic, MLL Intermediate (Speaking) + Breakthrough (Writing)
- L2 English GCSE Grade 4
- L3 Spanish @KS2, MLL Breakthrough (Speaking + Listening)
- L4 French GCSE Grade 6 [\approx MLL Intermediate (4 skills)]

At KS5, a similar pattern would apply. A-level languages qualifications would continue to be advocated as an attestation of advanced linguistic and intercultural competence. They too would be broadly pegged onto MLL, probably at MLL Advanced stage. And the caveats listed above for GCSE would all apply: they would mean that the A-level and the MLL Advanced stage were deemed broadly equivalent not in terms of value or weight or scope but specifically in terms of their attestation of abilities in the four skills.

4. Relation of MLL to other languages qualifications (II): Applied Languages certificate

One additional qualification recently proposed for KS5 (though takeable later in life too) is a new 'Applied Languages' certificate, not as one of the new 'MLL Assessments' but as a Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) Level 3 certificate.³⁰ This would provide students who have a GCSE (minimum Grade 4) or who have equivalent MLL Assessments (perhaps Preliminary stage in all four skills) in a language that they are not continuing at A-level a way of improving their four skills by applying them to an area of interest chosen from a list of options (such as science, politics, culture, history, business, tourism, hospitality, marketing, sport, music, health). Applied Languages could be taken in either year of post-16 education, typically alongside 3 A-levels or alongside other further education pathways. It could be taken either by students wanting to improve their language in a vocational direction or by ones wanting to pursue an area of personal or academic interest. It would improve the students' level beyond RQF Level 2, to Level 3, by improving their four skills rather than by adding systematically to GCSE-level grammar, phonics, and vocabulary (though the study of the chosen area would intrinsically widen the student's vocabulary in that area).

Applied Languages would be distinct both from GCSE and from A-level (a fully academic pathway which engages more analytically, through the language, with cultures and societies, and which develops all four skills to a higher level than Applied Languages, with considerably more grammar and vocabulary). Although Applied Languages would not have the format of an MLL Assessment, like GCSEs and A-levels it would be pegged broadly onto the MLL Framework (probably at higher Intermediate/lower Advanced stage). The rationale for the introduction of this Applied Languages qualification has been outlined more fully elsewhere (Kenny 2025).

5. Relation of MLL to university study

Moving beyond KS5: for those students applying to university or college for any subject, their MLL Profile would be a standard element in their UCAS statement. For those students studying languages at university at 'post-A-level' level, that learning could be pegged roughly onto the MLL Proficiency stage.³¹ As already mentioned, postgraduate-level languages studied could be pegged roughly onto the MLL Mastery stage. Again, the same caveats would apply at degree level as at GCSE and A-level: this rough pegging would mean that degrees and MLL Proficiency or Mastery were deemed broadly equivalent *not* as overall awards (the differences in curricular content would indeed be vast) but specifically in terms of their attestation of proficiencies in the four skills.

Although for purposes of exposition the MLL stages have been illustrated with reference to stages of mainstream education (primary, secondary, tertiary), as some of the illustrations have indicated there would be no systematic connection between the MLL stages and the stages of mainstream education. MLL Assessments could be taken at any point.

6. Relation of MLL to RQF and CEFR

What relation would the MLL have to two other frameworks? (i) The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF); (ii) the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which describes different levels of language proficiency and is widely used in Europe as well as further afield.

The relation of MLL to the RQF would be plotted, taking as a starting-point the rough peggings proposed above between MLL stages and existing RQF Level 2 and 3 qualifications (respectively GCSE and A-level).³² The mapping of the previous LLAS to the RQF could be reviewed and if necessary revised for the MLL.³³

Similarly, the relation of MLL to the CEFR would be plotted.³⁴ For present purposes of provisional illustration: MLL Breakthrough stage might be the broad equivalent of CEFR A1; MLL Mastery stage

the broad equivalent of CEFR C2; and so on. Indeed, the LLAS (which MLL adapts) was designed with reference to the CEFR. However, the MLL/CEFR benchmarking could be broad, in order to avoid the CEFR becoming a straitjacket.

7. Relation of GCSEs and A-levels to MLL and CEFR

The MLL would introduce greater clarity, coherence, and incentivisation into the languages education system, and greater usability for employers. But for that to happen, one additional innovation is needed: GCSEs and A-levels need to be benchmarked (against the MLL and the CEFR) *differentially, by language*.

Although in the context of this paper the reason for calling for this differentiation is that it would enable an MLL to realise its transformative potential, the differentiation is sorely needed *anyway* (regardless of the question of an MLL), in order to (i) make the GCSEs and A-levels even more inclusive and transparent for prospective learners, (ii) make these qualifications even more legible by employers and universities, (iii) meet national need by creating the conditions necessary for the gradual diversification of language-learning in mainstream schools beyond two or three European languages (vital though those two or three will remain).

At present, languages GCSEs and A-levels are not formally benchmarked against the CEFR (to inform learning objectives or assessment practices). But an Ofqual study of GCSE French, German, and Spanish has located 'grade 4 at level A1 of the CEFR scale [...], grade 7 at mid-A2 level and grade 9 around low B1'.³⁵ From this research it can be inferred that, notwithstanding some relatively minor differences in how French, German, and Spanish GCSEs might map onto the CEFR, those three languages could probably be grouped together as sharing the same (broad) benchmarking against the CEFR, rather than being benchmarked differentially. (The question of exactly where to set the equivalences, including in the light of the reformed GCSEs in those three languages, would need separate consideration.)

On the other hand, it is virtually certain that even broad CEFR plotting of current GCSEs and A-levels in other languages would in some cases suggest equivalences with *different* CEFR levels than for French, German, and Spanish.³⁶ There are two underlying but distinct causes for this:

- (a) the fact that learners for whom the language is their L1 (and/or who have some heritage background in the language) make up the great majority of the cohort in the case of some of these qualifications;
- (b) the large discrepancies between the learning hours that an L1 English speaker typically needs to achieve the same level in, say, Arabic, Japanese, or Mandarin as in, say, Spanish (roughly *three times* the number of learning hours for the speaking and listening skills, according to the Foreign Service Institute).³⁷

The combination of these two causes poses a considerable challenge for assessment and qualification design.³⁸ So far, the understandable solution has mainly been to allow tacitly for (what are almost certainly) considerable discrepancies in the proficiency levels expected by qualifications across some languages.

However, this needs to be tackled, for the wider reasons mentioned, as well as for an MLL. It is one of the longstanding spokes in the wheel of the languages education system that were evoked at the start of this paper. It disadvantages, in a qualification taken mainly by heritage learners, *both* (i) non-heritage-learner candidates, because it is harder for them to gain a given grade than if they were taking a languages qualification taken mostly by non-heritage-learners, *and* (ii) heritage-learner candidates, because of a tacit assumption of parity of proficiency between qualifications taken by cohorts with different profiles: that assumption encourages an incorrect inference that, say, a GCSE taken in the candidate's home language might be unfairly easy for them; it encourages under-estimation of the proficiency levels that they have actually attained, and of the amount of

formal learning (e.g. of writing skills) that has gone into that attainment.³⁹ The solution adopted by the IGCSE (having an alternative, 'First Language' version of the qualification) is unlikely to be feasible for GCSEs and A-levels, for reasons of cost and complexity; but it does confirm that there is a problem here needing to be solved.

The solution proposed here is focused and feasible. It is *not* for all languages GCSEs and A-levels to be reformed so that they assume the same proficiency levels across the four skills, making them all for example as hospitable to non-L1 learners as are the reformed GCSEs in French, German, and Spanish. Certainly, some steps in that direction may be desirable or underway (Pearson 2024), but they might not be desirable or feasible for all languages GCSEs and A-levels, and the present paper expresses no views on that question. Rather, the present proposal is simply for the standards of proficiency expected in languages GCSEs and A-levels to be made explicit, *by pegging those qualifications to the MLL and the CEFR on a language-by-language basis*.

In practice, this benchmarking would be broad and approximate; it would be partial (limited to the four skills), and again it would not imply any equivalence of value between GCSEs/A-levels and MLL Assessments. This broad benchmarking against the CEFR (and MLL) might differentiate languages GCSEs and A-levels into, say, two (or possibly three) clusters: one cluster consisting of French, German, Spanish, and other languages for which broadly similar proficiency levels are expected at GCSE and A-level; and another cluster (or two) of languages for which higher proficiency levels are expected at GCSE and A-level. There would still be an element of pragmatic 'fudge' (with some overriding of nuanced differences between languages), but far less, and of a more transparent kind, than at present.

This change would increase both (a) fairness and (b) transparency.

- (a) It would increase fairness for, say, Grade 6 heritage-learner candidates in a GCSE taken mainly by heritage-learner candidates, because it might signal (through the differentiated benchmarking) the higher level of proficiency (in some or all skills) that they had achieved relative to a Grade 6 candidate in GCSE French or Spanish; it would also be fairer to non-heritage-learner candidates contemplating taking that qualification (the one taken mainly by heritage learners), since it would give them a more transparent idea of the challenge they are undertaking, and it would foster greater public understanding of what they had achieved in obtaining a given grade (even, for example, if it was low).
- (b) It would also increase transparency by making GCSE and A-level language qualifications more legible to employers and universities, and more usable by them, since it would give them a more reliable sense of the candidate's actual level of attainment and proficiency in the language.⁴⁰ The GCSE (at Grade 4+) and A-level would still in every case be RQF Level 2 and 3 qualifications respectively: but that would be understood as expressing not one horizontal, across-the-board level of proficiency (which is a misleading fiction given the big differences between languages and cohort compositions) but rather a level of proficiency that it is appropriate to expect at Levels 2 and 3, taking account of (i) the difficulty of the language in question for an L1 English speaker, and, if wished, (ii) an approximate sense of the likely balance between L2 – and L1-learners in the cohort.⁴¹

So the transparency created by pegging GCSEs and A-levels approximately and differentially onto the MLL and CEFR would make the languages education system not just even fairer and more transparent, but more able to be inclusive of a wider range of learners (with or without a heritage background in the language) because of the system's improved coherence. The greater transparency would also make these qualifications more legible for their end-users: the RQF level of languages GCSEs and A-levels would express (i) the extent of the difficulty that the student has surmounted in their learning, while those qualifications' approximate equivalence to CEFR/MLL would express (ii) the learner's proficiency levels. There would be less confusion than at present between those two related but distinct things, each of which is valuable.

8. Incentives, costs, benefits, vision

Whatever the outcome of CAR's deliberations on whether to continue with the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure or to replace it, in order for languages to thrive as part of core general education to age 16⁴² – and for an MLL to help achieve that – the uptake both of languages GCSEs and of MLL Assessments would need to be incentivised by school performance measures.⁴³ Any such performance measures should also reward a mainstream school for enabling its students to take MLL Assessments for which the learning has been done mainly at home or in complementary schools. 'Carrot' as well as 'stick' incentives are needed, in order to avoid less well-resourced schools being penalised for having insufficient resources to provide such support. There is indeed evidence that (i) socio-economically disadvantaged schools struggle the most to enable their students to sit GCSEs in a language learned at home or in a complementary school, and yet that (ii) multilingualism is on average higher in those disadvantaged mainstream schools.⁴⁴

The MLL would also need to be encouraged by Ofsted, on the grounds that it would foster a broad, balanced, and *inclusive* curriculum. The bedrock of inclusiveness would be the MLL Profile, since every learner would have an MML Profile (not just those who 'choose languages'). Moreover, the MLL Profile, by being introduced to every school (regardless of whether the school enables students to take MLL Assessments) would be a very low-cost way of instilling immediate sector-wide awareness of the MLL Framework (and so of incentivising subsequent uptake of MLL Assessments and other language qualifications). So the MLL Profile would be, amongst other things, a Trojan Horse for the MLL Framework – an 'easy win'.

One inclusive alternative to accountability based on examination results would be for schools to receive a modest ringfenced MLL Grant to support all languages in their school.⁴⁵ Ofsted (and others, e.g. school governors) would then assess how well this grant was being used by the school to support languages through the MLL Framework. This would send out a clear statement that languages are valued by the Government (with a funding allocation to support assessment and examination entries) and that each student is on their own MLL journey.

The higher MLL stages would need to attract UCAS points, and even to be included in UCAS offers (which is likely to be achievable in the first instance for applications to university languages courses in particular).⁴⁶

While an MLL would require some Government funding, costs could be driven down by.

- (a) the use of digital technology for assessment (as already mentioned);
- (b) phasing the introduction of awards so that it started with settings where the necessary teaching and the unaccredited learning are largely *already* being done (e.g. KS2, KS3, and in complementary schools teaching a language for which there is no GCSE), and by designing the assessments so that they reduce as much as possible the need to modify that existing teaching in order to 'teach to the test';
- (c) seeking funding from cultural partners (of whom some already support languages education in the UK) to support the introduction of specific assessments at different stages in a given language.

So the introduction of an MLL Framework would *not* involve the immediate introduction of numerous new assessments at all stages in many languages, but would instead be selectively and progressively filled. That populating could start with 'low-hanging fruit' (assessing teaching and learning that already happens) but would over time foster the creation and assessment of new teaching and learning as the demand and the resource-opportunity arose. Similarly, an MLL Framework would not in itself constitute a comprehensive through-curriculum explicitly encompassing all dimensions of language-learning; focused mainly on the four skills, in its minimal formulation⁴⁷ it would not specify grammar (but it would support key qualifications that did, e.g. at GCSE), nor

intercultural learning (but again it would support the intercultural learning done through language-learning from KS2 to KS5 as well as in complementary schools and universities).

An MLL would on the other hand foster a more coherent disciplinary vision of the place of languages within the twenty-first-century education system, stretching indeed beyond teaching and learning right into the university research sector. For MLL's vision of building a multilingual outlook (encompassing one's first language too) applies as much to primary school (where CAR responses have argued for language-learning to be accompanied by language awareness that fosters such an outlook⁴⁸) as it does to languages education in general⁴⁹ and indeed to university research (where ideals of researchers immersing themselves epistemically and linguistically in single-language cultures have been replaced by recognition of the multilingual, translingual, and transnational nature of cultures and of the study of them).⁵⁰

An MLL would provide a solution to the problem that has long bedevilled policymakers of how to diversify the range of languages taught and accredited in schools so that, as well as boosting uptake of traditionally taught languages, it includes many other languages⁵¹ to meet urgent national as well as individual needs and skill deficits (economic, cultural, societal, educational).⁵² An MLL would achieve this in part by channelling and accrediting a considerable amount of teaching that already happens in complementary schools.

But overall, an MLL would benefit all kinds of learners. It would improve public attitudes to languages. It would make them not just a subject on the school curriculum (which some students want to take and some don't), but part of every young person's personal profile – recognised by employers and universities – which can be further developed not just at school but beyond, both in formal education and elsewhere, including the workplace. An MLL would be likely to increase uptake of existing qualifications as well as of new ones. It would increase opportunity; choice; motivation; usability of existing learning; incentivisation of additional learning; learners' sense of progression; learner autonomy; understanding of inter-cultural contact and of communication; and acquisition of lifelong skills.

Notes

1. For an overview of current challenges, see Ayres-Bennett and Forsdick (2024). Among disincentives to uptake not listed in the present paper, that of GCSEs in French, German, and Spanish being graded more severely than almost all other subjects is arguably the most significant. It is not included here, because solvable as a discrete issue, regardless of the question of an MLL. See Blow (2023); Thomson (2025).
2. The latest addition to the abundant evidence is Collen and Duff (2025: 20, 24, 25, 37).
3. Examples include:
 - (a) the well-documented problems of transition between KS2 (Key Stage 2) and KS3 (e.g., Collen and Duff 2025: 14–18);
 - (b) the lack of post-14 (in some cases post-13) languages pathways for the majority of students (i.e., for those who currently opt not to do a languages GCSE: see Department for Education 2025b);
 - (c) the lack of post-16 languages pathways for almost all students (i.e., for those who opt not to do a languages A-level) (see Department for Education 2025a).
4. For example, at KS2 there could be more cross-over of a systematic kind (in terms of consistent grammatical terminology or of language awareness) between Literacy and Languages. See the NALA resources (n.d.) Grammar in the National Curriculum; Holmes and Myles (2019: 12).
5. This dissociation overlaps to an extent with the question of barriers to language-learning opportunities for socially disadvantaged students: see Collen and Duff (2025: 25). Attempts to address it are beginning to be made by the National Consortium for Languages Education (<https://ncle.ucl.ac.uk/focus-on-home-heritage-and-community-languages/>) and by the Home, Heritage and Community Languages Advisory Group co-hosted by the Association of Language Learning and the British Council (<https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/language-zones/home-heritage-community-languages/>).
6. See Humphries et al. (2024). For examples of the unmet demand, see Language, Identity, Belonging: Raising Aspirations in Heritage Language Students (2025).

7. This applies, in different ways and to different extents, to GCSEs and A-levels *both* as taught in mainstream schools (e.g., French, German, Spanish) *and* as taught at home or in complementary schools (and then sat in mainstream schools functioning as Examination Centres). Ofqual (2017) examined the issue in relation to just five languages.
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/curriculum-and-assessment-review>.
9. E.g., Barrie Hunt in the present volume; ALL (2025: 3, 9, 11, 14); ALL/UCFL/ICLS/SAS (2025: 4); OCR (2024: 5). Bernadette Holmes and Barrie Hunt are developing proposals in the same broad direction as what is proposed here but which go further.
10. See Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2007); Department for Education and Skills (2002). OCR = the Oxford, Cambridge, and RSA Examinations examination board. In the UK, examination boards are awarding bodies that set and award secondary education qualifications (e.g. GCSEs, A-levels, and in this case LLAS qualifications). For England, the Department for Education (a ministerial department) sets the Subject Content (e.g. for GCSEs and A-levels), in compliance with which the examination boards then create detailed 'specifications' (including assessment methods); the process is regulated by Ofqual (a non-ministerial government department) – The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation. Where a qualification is offered by more than one examination board, schools are free to choose which to use.
11. While a different name from 'MLL' could in principle be coined for these assessments (as happened with OCR's Asset Language qualifications in relation to the Languages Ladder), it might be preferable and clearest for them to bear the same name as the overall MLL Framework.
12. Languages GCSEs and A-levels are standardised, summative assessments (not involving teacher assessment, though the oral test might involve a teacher-examiner) taken at the end of the two-year Key Stage 4 (KS4, typically age 14–16) for GCSE and of the two-year KS5 (typically age 16–18) for A-level. Whereas the present paper's proposals neither require nor preclude change to existing GCSEs and A-levels, greater integration between GCSEs and new Language Ladder qualifications is persuasively proposed by Barrie Hunt in the present volume.
13. As explained below, the MLL Framework would therefore be broader than the CEFR, which is less geared towards L1s and ancient languages.
14. In addition, it is to be hoped that languages will be added to the subject groups funded by the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview#courses-included-under-the-lle>).
15. The MLL Profile would also constitute a standardised national kernel (to be expanded where possible, but in all cases a guaranteed minimum) for the transfer of information from primary to secondary school at the KS2-3 transition.
16. Bernadette Holmes (private communication), in relation to the broadly similar proposals she is co-developing. Compare Scotland's 1+2 policy (Education Scotland 2019).
17. The same as in LLAS. But, whereas its six stages were further subdivided into 2–3 grades each, giving a total of 17 grades (Department for Children, Schools, and Families 2007), the MLL could be simpler, with no such subdivision of stages into grades.
18. Especially at the higher stages, there would ideally be a 'dual assessment focus of communicative competence (solving the task, conveying the message) with quality of utterance (relating to range of language, accuracy, pronunciation etc)' (Bernadette Holmes, private communication). Moreover, in addition to one-skill assessments, there could be an 'option for integrated skills assessment that would encourage teachers to improve their pedagogy and move to more task-based, problem-solving assessment rather than discrete skill which has a washback effect on classroom practice'; this would also be an opportunity to reinforce the intercultural dimension of the learning, since an integrated skills option would lend itself to more contextualised content (B. Holmes, private communication). The intercultural dimension of the previous Asset assessments (within the LLAS) largely took the form of ensuring that cultural references and assumptions within a given assessment were appropriate to the relevant language (Karen Ashton, private conversation).
19. Criterion- rather than norm-referenced, unlike GCSEs and A-levels.
20. The same as in the LLAS (Department for Children, Schools, and Families 2007).
21. This departure from the LLAS is suggested only tentatively, since the trade-off would be reduced precision in the attestation of proficiency level, and a reduced number of incentivising waystages.
22. As with the LLAS.
23. This would reduce the administration load in comparison with the LLAS, which had several testing sessions per year (Department for Children, Schools, and Families 2007: 3).
24. An existing model is provided by Avant Assessment (<https://www.avantassessment.com/about-avant>). The cost implications of involving an awarding body, while not negligible in the present context of fiscal squeeze, are modest relative to the gains of an MLL, and indispensable to the present proposal.
25. This proposed overall balance would be a departure from the LLAS. That scheme included much formative assessment, which proved however complex and hard to deliver consistently (N. Jones 2014: esp. 151).
26. ALL/UCFL/ICLS/SAS (2025: 3).

27. This would remove barriers to opportunity, since socio-economically disadvantaged students are considerably over-represented in this group (Collen and Duff 2025: 23–4).
28. In accordance with the phased approach outlined below, there might be an argument for delaying any introduction of MLL Assessments in French, German, and Spanish at Preliminary and Intermediate stages in order to maximise encouragement to take the reformed GCSEs in those languages (to be first examined in 2026) and in order to give the reformed GCSEs time to achieve their goal of increasing uptake. Currently about a third of languages teachers in state schools believe that the new GCSEs will have a small positive impact on uptake, but perceptions are changing year on year (Collen and Duff 2025: 24–5). Considerable doubts have been expressed by education researchers, teacher educators, and teachers about the Subject Content of the reformed GCSEs (Pachler and Broady 2022).
29. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, while complementary schools in England mainly teach L1- and/or heritage learners, some also teach L2- and/or non-heritage learners (e.g. Greek, Japanese, Mandarin, Turkish). I am not aware of existing research on this point.
30. So far as England is concerned, the RQF is the framework for the qualifications regulated by Ofqual. It stretches through Levels 2 (the equivalent of most GCSE grades) and 3 (the equivalent of A-level) to Level 8 (the equivalent of PhD). In the more far-reaching model being developed by Bernadette Holmes and others, Applied Languages qualifications, instead of being limited to the Level 3 one proposed here, could be extended to other levels too, in the form of the integrated skills options aired in n. 18 above. Applied Languages qualifications would then themselves be (what this paper calls) MLL Assessments, whereas the Applied Languages certificate proposed here is not an MLL Assessment but another qualification which (like GCSEs and A-levels) can be integrated within the MLL Framework.
31. The language-learning done by two other groups of university students would be pegged at lower MLL stages: (i) those learning a language from scratch as part of their degree; (ii) those who, in addition to their degree studies (in any discipline), learn a language, typically at their University's Language Centre, as part of institution-wide language provision (IWLP): see AULC (2024).
32. With the exception that GCSE Grades 1–3 are Level 1 qualifications.
33. Department for Education and Skills [archived 2006].
34. An exception could be made for English (when it is an L1), which would not need to be pegged onto the CEFR (which was designed largely with second-language acquisition in mind). On the other hand, the MLL/CEFR pegging could be applied to English as an L2 (see Jones 2014: 22), in coordination with the Bell Foundation's existing EAL Assessment Framework (<https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/resources/eal-assessment-framework/>) which is used in many schools; the MLL/CEFR pegging could also be applied to other L1 languages (such as the home language of EAL students), since their learners will often have relatively little prior exposure to some skills in the language (e.g. reading and writing).
35. Ofqual (2019: 5). See also Curcin and Black (2019).
36. To my knowledge this has not been researched. This assertion is based on abundant anecdotal evidence.
37. <https://www.state.gov/foreign-service-institute/foreign-language-training>.
38. On the case of Chinese, see Chen et al. (2023); Li et al. (2024); Natzler (2022: 31–40).
39. Aside from the question of GCSEs and A-levels: MLL Assessments would also give a clearer indication of the achievement of heritage learners (as did the LLAS): within a language, a learner's MML Profile can be 'jagged' (Ashton 2008: 177) as they progressively add literacy skills in the language to oral ones.
40. For example, GCSEs and A-levels would then relate more clearly to the Chartered Institute of Linguists's CEFR-based Language Level Frameworks (<https://www.ciol.org.uk/language-level-frameworks>).
41. 'Approximate' should be emphasised here: the proposal is *not* to measure exactly, still less to prescribe, the balance between L2- and L1-learners in a cohort – a notoriously difficult task – but simply to be transparent about the variation in expected proficiency levels (which is likely to be function of contextual factors including the balance between L2- and L1-learners within a cohort, ranging from mostly-L2 for some qualifications – e.g. GCSE French, German, Spanish – to mostly-L1 or heritage-learner for some others).
42. ALL/UCFL/ICLS/SAS (2025: 3).
43. The discontinuation of the LLAS was precipitated in part by the withdrawal of performance points for schools' submission of Asset Languages qualifications, and from those qualifications not counting towards the EBacc when the latter was introduced. See Jones (2014: 148–50); Steer (2015); Tinsley (2012).
44. See Collen and Duff (2024: 22); Collen and Duff (2025: 25).
45. This could be targeted at those schools in say FSME Quintiles 3–5 where, as just indicated, both the existing multilingualism and also the barriers to language-learning are greatest.
46. On the recognition by universities of the languages qualifications of home, heritage, and community learners of languages, see Humphries et al. (2024). J. Carruthers and E. Humphries are currently working on a toolkit on this issue for University Admissions Offices.
47. For a possible wider formulation, see n. 18 above.
48. ALL/UCFL/ICLS/SAS (2025: 2–3).
49. Coalition for Language Education (2024).

50. See the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI) (<https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/open-world-research-initiative/>) (2016–20) and the Translating Cultures (<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/languages-cultures-and-film/research/projects/translating-cultures/>) project (2012–20), both funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
51. Within mainstream schools in England, the Mandarin Excellence Project (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/languages/mandarin-excellence-programme>) is the one existing tangible step towards such diversification.
52. Numerous reports include Ayres-Bennett et al. (2022); British Academy et al. (2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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